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Authoritarianism

Dale Farm  
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# As protest gathers force, so does state oppression

**T**his isn't China or Zimbabwe. We live in a free society with elections every five years. Yes, but surely even the most credulous or complacent of Brits has noticed the creep of authoritarianism, its breath upon our necks. All states try to increase their control over the lives and thoughts of their citizens. Security threats provide great opportunities for "democratic" repression like the callous anti-terrorism laws passed by Blair and Co. Fearful populations are easily persuaded that only extreme measures can protect their land and rights.

When economies are atrophying, the powerful turn even more hyperactively repressive. Anxieties about jobs and cash produce anger, endanger the settled order, which, however iniquitous, must be protected. The establishment understands that duty. The camp outside St Paul's Cathedral by activists who want a fairer deal for all is winning public sympathy. Can't be allowed. They will be overcome, defeated by any means necessary. What about the right to peaceful protest? Yeah, what of it? Hard times need hard leadership.

For more than a year, Tories in this coalition government have discredited, attacked and broken any collective resistance to their poli-

cies and economic decisions. Union action is damned by all politicians before it occurs, even if all the legal procedures are carefully followed. Now the Tories cynically want to "reappropriate" protective labour laws from the EU so workers can be sacked by employers without all that bother of having to go to industrial tribunal. In effect this is a charter for discrimination and disgraceful Victorian work practices.

When the country celebrates the bicentenary of Charles Dickens next year, perhaps everyone in government will read him and understand what happens to humans under uncontrolled capitalism. They should also be made to read *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism*, a brilliant and lucid analysis of the venerated system – now a world religion – by Ha-Joon Chang, an award-winning political economist at Cambridge University. He believes capitalism is the "best system that humanity has invented" but not in its latest form which is promoted on a false prospectus and, claims Chang, leads to "slower growth, rising inequality and heightened instability in most countries".

So we have the St Paul's settlement and the inevitable overreaction. Most high churchmen are joining in with the City of London, an increasingly paranoid government, and law and order agencies to reinstate the unjust status

quo, thus proving that Christianity readily compromises its own ideals when it comes to money and power.

Before this latest conflict we had the entirely justifiable student demonstrations against fee increases. Many parents – most of them unacquainted with what police forces do in our badlands – found their kids kettled, charged and imprisoned. They are now aware of young offenders' institutions, and the terrible hopelessness of such places. They never knew, they say, and would hereafter stop their kids going out to the streets to demonstrate. See how state pressure works?

**M**inisters will not attend to the deeper causes of the disorderly breakouts like the summer riots and appear now to be influencing the criminal justice system – which should always be detached from political ideology and be totally independent. Some of the comments by judges, and the manifestly unreasonable sentences meted out, should worry us all.

Ken Clarke, the Justice Secretary, whose instincts are liberal and often fair, will soon be replaced. This autumn, a government report

found that nearly 50 per cent of the rioters arrested couldn't read or do simple sums. Many had special needs, came from families with high unemployment, or were raised in poverty. More than 55 per cent were either black or mixed race. None of that matters. They were all "criminals", said Cameron and Theresa May.

Such official indifference and tough action was seen at Dale Farm, too. If we had watched such evictions in, say, Zimbabwe, where white farmers had to hand over land they owned, we would have been appalled. When police and councillors think they can do what they want to a set of unwanted "outsiders", no one is safe.

We saw this kind of thing in the 1980s when Thatcher unleashed special police forces on black and Asian people, and then miners. All too soon other citizens felt the weight of oppressive power, the loss of their liberties. The environment today is even more muggy, heavy with trepidation, stifling and enervating. We can either submit completely to our rulers and their networks of the rich and influential – or not. Be afraid – or fight back. Defy the new authoritarians – or let them take our liberties and nation. Those outside St Paul's have made their choice. What about you and me?

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